



Keep Chicago and Illinois Flying

Testimony Before the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee June 15, 2001

My name is Edward Paesel; I am the Executive Director of the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association. Today, I also am privileged to represent the Keep Chicago/Illinois Flying Coalition, consisting of state, municipal and county elected officials from Cook, Will, DuPage and Kankakee Counties, as well as business leaders from the Chicago Southland, Will County and Kankakee County Regional Chambers of Commerce. We also number organized labor, citizen groups and educators as part of our coalition.

I come here, today, to reiterate and reinforce our 14-year effort to expand the aviation capacity of the Chicago region. We have stood, in a bipartisan effort, with the State of Illinois, its present and two prior governors, in not only calling for, but planning, the aviation facilities that would serve the region, the State and the nation for the next 20 years, and more.

Some call us obstructionists. But it is we who - with the state - 14 years ago, recognized the rapidly-growing aviation demand and the lack of regional capacity to handle it. In the early 1990's, many forecasters foresaw the crisis conditions that finally overtook the national aviation system; Secretary Mineta, in 1997, warned that we were approaching gridlock. Chicago is a major contributor to that gridlock because its airport sponsors have refused to acknowledge these forecasts. As late as a year ago, O'Hare's two major airlines were stating, publicly, that they could accommodate demand well into the 21st Century. As late as a month ago, the City of Chicago testified to a State legislative committee that O'Hare would not require runway expansion.

Its adverse conditions and ripple effects, however, finally have pushed O'Hare to center stage, nationally. Many Congressional leaders must fly through Chicago and they know, well, its serious problems. Iowa's two senators are asking that our governor be stripped of his authority so that O'Hare can be expanded to serve their state's 2.9 million residents. We, too, believe that 2.9 million Iowans should be served through Chicago's aviation hubs; as early as 1995, our studies predicted the loss of service to their cities, a forecast which the airlines loudly protested.

We applaud the courageous stand of Governor Ryan. His priority is the economic well-being of twelve million Illinois citizens. And our responsibility is to see that the 2.5 million South Suburbanites, who live within 45 minutes of the proposed South Suburban Airport, finally are well-served, as well. Our travel time to O'Hare, exceeding two hours, severely restricts our use, and discourages the location of business and industry in our midst.

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Fourteen years of planning, often against obstructionist actions of the City, the airlines and the Federal government, have finally resulted in a thoroughly-planned airport that could be operational within five years. The Federal government has the authority to expedite the EIS for the South Suburban Airport that has been stalled for four years. We urge this Committee to press forward with a solution to the national aviation problem that is:

- environmentally sensitive, and
- socially just.

This can and should be achieved without abandoning the environmental safeguards that the nation has put in place. The South Suburban Airport plans are well-documented and publicly discussed. There are no similar plans for O'Hare runways that have been presented to the public. Because the environmental consequences of O'Hare's expansion are expected to be severe, documentation of them has been avoided; and the need for expansion, itself, has been denied.

Our airport plan protects the environment and enriches our citizens. In our service area of 2.5 million residents, we have a job shortage of 450,000. This will grow to 550,000 if we continue to pile the region's aviation rewards into the area surrounding O'Hare. Our communities can be revitalized and the region rebalanced, with no additional public funding, by building the South Suburban Airport. Building the South Suburban Airport can solve many of the nation's aviation problems and eliminate the region's growing economic divide in one fell swoop. It is smart growth, in all respects.

We ask that you truly listen to our concerns, today, because they are the concerns of the people. They are, as well, the concerns of local government and business leaders, who offer - with the South Suburban Airport - solutions to the national and regional aviation crises that are both short-range and long-term. Thank you for your attention.

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